

Alcohol and Teens: Why They Don't Mix

The effect of alcohol on teenagers can be significantly more dangerous than the effect alcohol has on adults. Learn more about alcohol's physical and mental impact on teenagers.

Physical Affects of Alcohol

A normal human liver can safely process an estimated 50 alcohol calories an hour (one ounce of 40-percent alcohol). However, studies show that teenagers need only half that amount before their livers can no longer safely process the alcohol and their bodies experience the harmful effects of alcohol. To put this amount in perspective, for a teen to ingest a "safe" 25-alcohol calories per hour, he or she would have to drink no more than one-fourth of a "light" beer over the course of one hour.

A person's rate of intoxication depends on body size, body fat, the food present in one's body, and the concentration of alcohol over time. Women tend to be affected more quickly than men. The rule of thumb is that the bigger physically one is and the more food one has in his or her body, the slower the alcohol will affect him or her. Since many teenagers are not yet fully grown, the effects of alcohol may happen more quickly than with full-grown adults.

Regardless of age or gender, the physical effects of alcohol are fairly typical. Any person who has consumed too much alcohol for their body size can expect to experience:

- Heightened relaxation;
- Reduced or heightened blood flow;
- Impairment of thoughts and judgment;
- Extreme emotional reactions;
- Inadequate muscle coordination; and
- Slowed or altered speech.

When consumed over long periods of time or in extreme doses, alcohol can severely affect an individual, causing brain and/or liver damage, coma or even death.

According to the American Medical Association (AMA), teenagers are more prone to alcohol-related brain damage than adults. This may be due in part to the popularity among teenagers of binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as when a man drinks five or more alcoholic beverages in a row; for women it is four or more. This extreme dose of alcohol can lead to the same effects as mentioned above, but with more severe consequences due to the age, body weight and tolerance level of teenagers.

Consequences of Alcohol Consumption

The United States bans sales of alcohol to those under the age of 21, yet teenagers still find ways to obtain and consume alcohol. Some families may feel that, in an adult-supervised setting, teenage drinking is harmless fun. However, there are serious consequences associated with teenage drinking, including:

- Compromised health. While the cumulative effects of alcohol consumption have been documented as being very detrimental to the human body, alcohol misuse can also cause temporary health issues such as a lowered immune system and dehydration. Effects can be harsher if the teenager does not have a healthy diet or does not participate in regular physical activity.
- Compromised memory. The AMA has repeatedly stated that alcohol impairs cognitive functioning in adults. Now research is proving the same to be true in teenagers; with prolonged use, this impaired functioning accumulates and intensifies.
- Lowered inhibitions. Some people enjoy alcohol for the uninhibited feeling it creates. For teenagers who are still forming a sense of themselves, as well as a sense of others, this lack of inhibition can lead to negative situations. Fear and responsibility are often replaced with false bravado and non-consequential thinking, and personal safety awareness skills often fall short. This can result in bodily harm through accidents or stunts; physical or emotional abuse of others; and unplanned sexual relations.

- Drunk driving. Many people, regardless of age, feel they are competent to drive, when in reality their judgment is impaired by alcohol consumption. Teens may be more prone to drive while intoxicated due to a lack of understanding of the consequences, general irresponsibility, fear of getting in trouble if they do not come home with their car, a hesitancy to call parents for a ride, and lack of knowledge of or access to public transportation. To insure that your child does not drive while intoxicated, and does not get in a car with an intoxicated driver, assure him or her that safety is the most important element.
- Unsafe sex. Lowered inhibitions can lead to sexual relations, both protected and unprotected. Talk with your child about sex, letting him or her know that it is not acceptable to have sex with someone who is drunk; it is not acceptable to practice unsafe sex; and that the best course of action is to wait until he or she is sober to make a decision concerning intimacy.

What Parents Can Do

There are ways families can help curb teenage drinking. Try the following if you have a teenage son or daughter:

- Talk with your child. Most teenagers will relate with what their parents say more than with an advertisement or sponsored message. Talk with your child about the dangers of drinking. Discuss the side effects of even one drink. Keep the conversation flowing between your child and yourself: ask him or her if he or she has friends who drink, if drinking goes on at parties, etc.
- Discuss the history of drinking. If your child understands how alcohol was used in historical celebrations, and the reasons why people drink, he or she may be more careful in choosing a drinking pattern.
- Have a game plan. Unfortunately, there is a chance your child will drink at some point before he or she is 21 years old. Reassure your child that if he or she does drink, you will not be angry, but that there will be a discussion about the activity.
- Discuss the dangers of drinking and driving. Tell your child not to get in a car with anyone who has been drinking; to be especially careful when walking or bicycling at night; and to never drink and drive. In fact, make drinking and driving grounds for taking away his or her license. Additionally, tell your child that you will pick him or her up if he or she is ever in a position where the driver is incapacitated, no questions asked.
- Take action. Write to your local television affiliates and request they not accept or run advertisements for alcohol during shows with an underage viewership. Write to alcohol marketers and request they not use teen-friendly characters or famous figures to promote their alcoholic products.

What Schools Can Do

While parental involvement is vital, so is involvement at the educational level. Inquire at your teen's high school to see if it offers the following:

- Drug and alcohol awareness classes. These should be mandatory and cover the legal and health aspects of drugs and alcohol consumption.
- Student driving classes. Driver's education classes should include a section covering the dangers of drinking and driving.
- Students Against Drunk Driving (S.A.D.D.) Chapter. Also known as Students Against Destructive Decisions, this non-profit offers ways for students to make positive lifestyle decisions.
- Strict no-drinking policies during regular school days as well as school-related events and functions.
- Peer counseling. Teens may feel less fearful of talking about drinking if they can do so with someone their own age.

Underage drinking is also prevalent in college settings. If your child is in college, check with the Dean of Students to see what type of drinking policies are in place and enforced at the college. Also, request that binge drinking informational sessions be mandatory in dormitories, fraternities and sororities, and that on-campus or campus-affiliated parties be alcohol-free.

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